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Islamic Political Theology

Ovamir Anjum

The central idea within Islamic political theology is that sovereignty, or the authority of final judgment, in nature as well as law, belongs to God. At its heart lies God's revealed command rather than a logically derived corollary of God's nature or analogy with God's governance. The Qur'an does not teach the rule of a class of men authorized by God; it teaches that the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 11 AH/632 CE) was the last of the prophets, after whom God no longer governs through a spokesperson. Hence the question naturally arose: who could possibly succeed the Prophet? For the Sunnī majority, the answer was the Umma, the community of those who believe in the Prophet's message, who were to be governed and led in their mission by a successor (*khalīfa* or caliph) chosen from the Prophet's tribe, the Quraysh. This position lay between two radically opposed alternatives: the Khārijites, who questioned any hierarchy in favour of plain reading of scripture and a violent, exclusionary piety; and the Shī'a, for whom chosen men in the lineage of the Prophet's cousin 'Alī inherited infallible knowledge and the exclusive right to rule as Imām. Throughout history, the tension between Umma-centred and Imām-centred interpretations of Islamic political theology have generated creative reinterpretations. The aftermath of colonialism and the encounter with secularism has been particularly fertile in intellectual experimentation. In our arguably post-secular age, Islamic political theology is witnessing a robust revival in interest and creativity.

Keywords: Political theology, Caliphate, Imam, Umma, Political Islam, siyasa, Sovereignty

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1 Political theology and Islam

To speak of Islamic political theology, we must begin with a working definition of political theology itself. In one commonly given version, 'what distinguishes all political theology from other types of theology or political discourse is the explicit attempt to relate discourse about God to the organization of bodies in space and time' (Scott and Cavanaugh 2004: 2). On first analysis, then, 'political theology' could mean (a) a type of theology that addresses political subjects, or (b) political thought that addresses theological matters. These two senses are not neatly separable. A third definition, the one typically intended in the European genealogy of the phrase, is (c) the analogous workings of the subject matters of politics and theology (Schmitt 2006). This Schmittian sense of the phrase remains rare in the Islamic tradition, precisely because it requires a measure of secularization as its premise; only when God is no longer the Lawgiver and the fount of political authority can an analogy between politics and theology become available. Nevertheless, the analogizing of kingly power to God's cosmic governance reflected in such notions as the ruler being God's shadow on earth did appear in medieval Islamic statecraft, even being attributed to the Prophet in one hadith (as discussed below), although its secularizing potential was somewhat constrained by the dominant legal and theological discourses of the time, which militated against any deification of earthly rulers (Marlow 1995).

The central idea of Islamic political theology is that sovereignty, or the authority of final judgment, in nature as well as law, belongs to God. At its heart lies God's revealed command rather than a logically derived corollary of God's nature or analogy with God's governance. The Qur'an does not teach the rule of a class of men authorized by God; it teaches that the Prophet Muḥammad (d. 11 AH/632 CE) was the last of the prophets, after whom God no longer governs through a spokesperson. Hence the question naturally became: who could possibly succeed the Prophet? The fuller form of this question took longer to manifest in history, namely: who inherits infallible guidance on salvific matters? This effectively meant knowledge of the correct meanings of revelation in cases of disagreement, as well as who could rightfully claim political leadership of the community (Umma) and its mission. The resulting controversies are often understood, inadequately, as power struggles. This essay presents an account of the variety of answers to this question, as given and debated across the breadth and length of Islamic history.

1.1 Risks and inevitability of translation

The term 'political theology' has no equivalent in Arabic or any other Islamicate language. Political terms indigenous to the Islamic tradition, such as the caliphate (*al-khilāfa*, deputyship to the Prophet) or the imamate (*al-imāma*, leadership of the believing community), inherently join political and religious meanings, as do phrases used in the

titles of key political treatises written across Islamic history, such as *al-aḥkām al-sultānīya* (rulings [in divine law] pertaining to governance) or *al-siyāsa al-sharʿīya* (politics as ordained by divine law). If imported without care, the term 'Islamic political theology' therefore risks subordinating our knowledge of Islam to modern European categories. We need not conclude from this that concern with the Western Christian history of theological reflection is merely a distraction, or worse, distortion, of the study of Islam. The very fact that the Qur'an articulates its theology, viz., its notion of God and God's relation to the world, in part through critical commentary on Judaism and Christianity, suggests that studying the intertwined Christian and Jewish legacies is an enterprise internal to both Islamic scripture and tradition.

The apparently innocent question of whether early Islamic thought was theological reflection on politics (as Muslims often assume) or political exploitation of theological language (as modern secular scholars are wont to think) is a loaded one. Consider the insightful observation of German scholar Josef van Ess:

[P]olitical thinking is as old as Islam itself. And what is perhaps even more important: political experiences have always been analysed and explained by examples taken from the first generation of the Islamic community. Right from the beginning the Muslims were confronted with political success and political failure, victory as well as discord and schism. This was their primary experience, the '*Urerlebnis*' to which the Muslim *imagilzaire* never ceased to be bound. (Van Ess 2001: 164)

Yet, further consider van Ess's opening comments in the same article: 'In early Islam [political] ideas were produced in a way slightly different from our own, but the scientific bogus around them was not less annoying than nowadays' (2001: 151). His suggestion that religion merely provided the rhetoric, the external form, for underlying political questions betrays an assumption that true religion is limited to beliefs about the supernatural, while concerns with earthly power befit the City of Man à la Augustine of Hippo. The Qur'an, in contrast, declares that God is concerned with the victory of the righteous and is worshipped in and through earthly struggles: 'We sent down iron in which there is mighty power and many a benefit for men, and for Allāh may know who will aid Him and His messengers, though unseen' (Q. 57:25) and that 'Allāh has decreed: It is I and My messengers that must prevail' (Q. 58:21).

Given that the constitutive Islamic belief is monotheism, the preaching and establishment of which in the form of a devout human community was the purpose of Islam's earthly order (Q. 22:40–41), the political in early Islam can be more appropriately said to be a creature of the theological. The two terms, therefore, are not quite equivalent. While it is hard to imagine politics in Islam without theological underpinnings, and we might therefore

conclude that all Islamic politics is theological, the converse is not strictly the case. Not all concern with salvation and God is collective or political: there remains an unmistakably individualist dimension to salvation, insofar as every person shall stand before God alone and be accountable for one's beliefs as well as works (e.g. Q. 19:95).

One final note of caution about the interpenetration of the political and the theological is in order. Whereas not every theological or religious question is political, any question whatsoever is liable to *politicization*. The most obvious instance of the mutual entailment of politics and theology in Islam – namely, the third/ninth-century 'Abbāsid caliph al-Ma'mūn's (r. 198–218/813–833) inquisition (*miḥna*) of the *Ahl al-Sunna* (The Party of Tradition) regarding the createdness of the Qur'an – turned on a theological problem chosen by the caliph specifically for its apolitical nature (Nawas 1996). This means not only that any theological problem can be politicized, but that those questions that appear to be apolitical might be the most apt candidates for politicization. The converse is also true: any political problem can take on theological colours. This suggests that a conceptual separation between the political and the religious or theological, even if imaginable and at times useful, is of limited use.

2 Qur'anic political theology

The Qur'an sees its first audience, the Arabs, as a people of ignorance (*jāhiliyya*), beholden to a kind of compromised monotheism. As one scholar notes, 'the Jāhiliyya tribes cannot be said to have been straightforward polytheists', but rather 'were mushrikūn, i.e. while accepting and admitting the existence and supreme authority of God, they associated other deities with Him' (Kister 1980: 48). Islamic monotheism (*tawḥīd*) requires not only recognition of God (*Allāh*) as the one Creator and Sustainer, but also worship of Him alone (monolatry). This the Qur'an repeatedly declares to be the key teaching of every prophet since Adam. The name of the religion preached by the Qur'an, '*islām*', itself means 'to give oneself exclusively to God' (Baneth 1971: 183–190). In fact, in its immediate and narrow sense, *islām* connotes surrender to the Prophet's earthly authority, whereas *imān* (faith) refers to complete surrender to the truth of inner realities (Izutsu 1965). The Qur'an links its deep monotheism to God's sole right to give law. This is best elucidated through the key Qur'anic verses that defined the new Muslim community, and that have since been deployed and redeployed throughout history as proof of God's sovereignty.

2.1 Legal sovereignty

The repeated declaration in the Qur'an that *in al-ḥukm illā li-llāh* (Q. 12:40, 67; 6:57) – 'Judgment belongs to none but God' – furnished the mantras of early Islamic disputes, the opening lines of classical Islamic legal treatises, and the slogans of intellectual and revivalist movements throughout Muslim history. This theme is repeated in numerous forms and provides, one might say, a political translation of the Islamic testament of faith:

‘There is no god but Allāh’. This principle effectively states that not only does power belong to the Creator and Sustainer in the metaphysical sense, but that authority (*ḥukm*; *amr*) in human affairs too is God’s. The Qur’anic discourse therefore functions at and constantly shifts between two planes: a normative (*shar‘ī*) level, which lays out divine law in the moral domain of human freedom and action, and in which humans are asked to strive for what God desires; and a metaphysical or existential (*kawnī*) level, where God, being omnipotent and omniscient, controls all things and yet allows occurrences that He dislikes for some wise purposes. The Prophet is told that the decision to punish or forgive the unbelievers is not his, but God’s alone (Q. 3:128). God also directly guides the Prophet’s decisions and, in Medina, those who questioned the Prophet’s tactical decisions in battle were told that ‘all *amr* belongs to God’ (Q. 3:154). A stronger version of the same idea is expressed in Sūrat al-Mā’ida, in verses whose starkness has often generated radical ideas and mitigative commentary in the exegetical tradition,

Whoso judgeth not by that which Allāh hath revealed: such are disbelievers. (Q. 5:44)

Disbelief being the highest indictment in the Qur’an, two subsequent verses repeat the charge, but declare the naysayers ‘wrongdoers’ (Q. 5:45) and ‘wicked’ (Q. 5:47).

Just as authority belongs to God exclusively, so too does *dīn*. While often translated as ‘religion’, *dīn* could be understood as the ordering principle of a given community, its way of life (Gardet 1965). The believers are told incessantly to purify (*akhlīṣū*, *ikhhlāṣ*) their *dīn* for God alone (e.g. Q. 39:2, 11; 98:5). In short, just as there is no room for humans to worship another besides God, there is no room for them to take judgments, decisions, or customs issued by any other than God as authoritative.

2.2 Political sovereignty

That political theology is foundational to Islam, and not merely the pragmatic or ad hoc accretion of its imperial phase, becomes obvious once we recognize the Meccan revelations’ world-making aspiration, even prior to the Muslim community’s acquisition of power. The Meccan *sūras* challenged the foundations of the political power of the Qurayshite elite and the Arabian order in general. The Qur’an reports its Meccan interlocutors’ recognition of the danger that the Prophet’s message posed to their standing among the Arabs: ‘And they say, “If we were to follow the guidance with you, we would be swept from our land”’ (Q. 28:57). The Qur’an’s threats to the Meccans, should they fail to obey it, are conveyed through stories of earlier prophets in which God inevitably ensures that the believers inherit the earth (Q. 35:39). The struggle against injustice and unbelief, and the ultimate triumph of the prophets and their followers, are common themes. Idle talk that leads to no action is decried (Q. 26:226). The encounter between Moses

(Mūsā) and Pharaoh is a central and oft-repeated story in the Qur'an, being developed at length in the Meccan *sūras*. God gives authority as a test, and rejecters of God's message are condemned as ingrates neither deserving of authority nor a good life. Power rightly belongs to the righteous believers alone, but they too are tested and are made to lose it when they neglect God, become lax in their prayers, transgress against each other, and follow their egoistic desires (Q. 19:59).

These themes become more emphatic in the Medinan *sūras*. Rather than any accommodation of the existing rulers, to render unto Caesar his due and God His, the Qur'an insists that all dominion belongs to God. Caesar is to be humbled by dedicated believers, to whom God promises victory (Q. 58:21). A characteristic Medinan verse encourages the believers to persist in *jihād* (struggle for faith, including armed struggle) alongside the Prophet by invoking the example of many rabbis who fought valiantly alongside past prophets (Q. 3:146). The purpose of political power and its quest is to serve God, as indicated in what is taken by Muslim exegetes to be the first verse permitting military activity:

Those who are being fought are given permission since they have been wronged [...] those expelled from their homes for declaring that their lord is Allāh [...] those if We give them power in the land [will] establish prayers, give alms, command right, and forbid wrong [...]. (Q. 22:39–41)

In the final phase of *jihād*, on which generally see Rudolph Peters' translation and compilation of classical and modern treatises (1977), a late Medinan verse demands an Islamic political order based not on coerced personal conversion, but rather by imposing *jizya* on the People of the Book:

Fight against such of those who have been given the Scripture as believe not in Allāh nor the Last Day, and forbid not that which Allāh hath forbidden by His messenger, and follow not the Religion of Truth, until they pay the tribute readily, being brought low. (Q. 9:29)

2.3 Rational sovereignty

The Divine law conveyed through revelation is discoverable by human reason, and yet reason is no substitute for it. The Qur'an suggests that humans possess a natural proclivity to monotheism, even, in some interpretations of verse 7:172, a kind of mystical, primordial knowledge. While another verse complicates this by denying that humans are born with any knowledge (Q. 16:78), this primordial instinct to worship one God does not necessarily translate into correct moral judgments of the kind supposed by a strong natural law theory, although the Mu'tazila, Islam's earliest intellectuals and apologists, argued

precisely that. Islamic source-texts (the Qur'an and the hadith materials) walk a fine line between emphasizing the reasonability of Islamic norms, on the one hand, and, on the other, stressing the limits of human knowledge and God's exclusive authority to give law and declare right and wrong. For the majority of theologians, such Qur'anic declarations as 'God knows and ye know not' (Q. 2:216; 3:66) severely temper human claims of ethical knowledge independent of revelation. Humans are, nevertheless, endowed with the capacity to recognize divine guidance once they encounter it. Every human child is born upon *fiṭra* – the divinely bestowed natural disposition (Q. 30:30), which is seen as tantamount to the true religion of Islam, an idea elaborated in the Prophet's more explicit statement: 'Every newborn is born upon *fiṭra*, and it is his parents that make him a Nazarene or a Jew or a Magian' (al-Bukhārī, no. 1385). Muslim theologians have long debated the nature and extent of human ethical knowledge (Jackson 2009). How one resolves those debates has significant implications for political theology (Anjum 2012).

2.4 Post-prophetic sovereignty

The Qur'an anticipates a world in which God's guidance ceases to take the form of direct revelation through a living human agency, and by which means it is then passed on to humans. The Prophet Muḥammad is only human, but just as he must die, so too must God's religion continue:

Muḥammad is but a messenger, messengers (the like of whom) have passed away before him. Will it be that, when he dieth or is slain, ye will turn back on your heels? He who turneth back on his heels doth no hurt to Allāh, and Allāh will reward the thankful. (Q. 3:144)

Given that the Qur'an also declares Muḥammad to be the last prophet – the 'Seal of Prophets', the final link in an unbroken chain of messengers spanning the entirety of human history up until that point – his death is an event of great metaphysical significance. The possibility of a post-prophetic phase in human history raises the most central question in Islamic political theology: who inherits the position once occupied by the prophets? The Qur'an does not name a single successor but does suggest a possible answer in verse 2:143: it is 'you all' (*ja'alnākum*) – the entire Umma – that has been made as an *ummatan wasaṭan* – a justly-balanced nation – that must now bear witness to humankind just as the Messenger bore witness to them. No other agency is named in the Qur'an to do God's work. The only authority discernible in the Qur'an is one that emerges out of the collectivity of the believers, from within the Umma:

O ye who believe, obey Allāh and obey the Messenger and those of you who are in authority; and if ye have a dispute concerning any matter, refer it to Allāh and the

Messenger if ye are (in truth) believers in Allāh and the Last Day. That is better and more seemly in the end. (Q. 4:59)

Exegetes have identified various individuals as being ‘those of you who are in authority’ (*ulū al-amr*), the most obvious in the Qur’anic context being the commanders that the Prophet appointed during various expeditions. Among Qur’anic exegetes, two (not necessarily contradictory) opinions are equally popular concerning the phrase’s post-prophetic meaning, namely, that after God and His Messenger, the believers ought to turn to both their rulers (caliphs or their appointed commanders) and those of knowledge and understanding.

2.5 Ummatic exceptionalism

Several key Qur’anic declarations of a covenantal nature address not the Prophet but the believers at large, including ‘Thus We have appointed ye a midmost nation, that ye may be witnesses against mankind, and that the messenger may be a witness against ye’ (Q. 2:143). Another declares, ‘Ye are the best nation, brought forth for humankind, ye command what is right, forbid wrong, and believe in Allāh; if the People of the Book were to believe, it would be better for them’ (Q. 3:110). These spell out what might be called Ummatic exceptionalism: the idea that the believers, Muḥammad’s followers, constitute an exceptional community in the course of human history, who bear the duty previously borne by divinely guided prophets. These verses accord the Muslim Umma a favoured status, conditioned on its rectitude and disposal of its duty to carry out the prophetic mission in a post-prophetic world. This exceptionalism is not quite the same as the Schmittian friend-enemy distinction, for the Qur’an ever holds out the possibility of the animosity between the believers and their enemies turning into affection and friendship, presumably through conversion, and encourages fairness and charity towards all non-hostile persons (Q. 60:7), with special permission to maintain social relations with the People of the Book (Q. 5:5).

In sum, the Qur’an engaged the political in at least two ways: by making an authority necessary to implement its laws within its community and by tasking the Umma with carrying on the Prophet’s mission beyond his death so as to make the Word of God supreme.

3 Political theology in the hadith

On the whole, the Prophet’s teachings as preserved in the hadith corpus reiterate the Qur’anic emphasis on divine sovereignty. There are, however, notable differences in the form and substance of the two sacred sources. Unlike the Qur’an, the hadith corpus is not bounded, nor is it a single body of texts of the same epistemic value, for Muslim scholars readily recognize the role of human effort in its preservation and evaluation, with

well-known disagreements existing among hadith experts concerning their criteria and judgment of authentication. Nor are the internal contradictions in this corpus always easy to reconcile. Precisely because of this intractable quality, the hadith have been far more liable to effective deployment, manipulation, and abuse in political and social conflicts. As one scholar notes, ‘Political and sectarian conflicts were a major engine for hadith forgery. All the major political conflicts in classical Islamic history were accompanied by hadiths forged for propagandistic purposes’ (Brown 2009: 72). This phenomenon prompted the development of a sophisticated Muslim hadith criticism, which invalidated most of such hadiths, although the success of this enterprise remains contested in Western scholarship (Brown 2009: 204ff.). Exploring the hadiths on any political topic involves the gruelling task of investigating the authenticity of those traditions in addition to determining their meanings and implications. Thankfully, extensive academic work has been done on this subject in the Arabic language (Dumayjī 1987: 585–605). One way to render this diversity manageable is to identify major thematic clusters in the hadith corpus. The following clusters capture most of the hadith traditions that bear on the intersection of politics and theology:

- (1) Traditions prophesying or declaiming the political future of the Umma, such as identifying which individuals or clans will or ought to be the imāms or caliphs (these terms are used interchangeably in hadith traditions), and the phases of rule. One cluster prophesies rulers going from good to bad to worse to good again, and recommends the course of action to be taken in these various circumstances (Dumayjī 1987: 37).
- (2) Traditions containing normative statements about who deserves to rule. Sunnī and Shī‘ī hadith traditions often present different teachings or different versions of the same general narratives, although the overlap between the two is not insignificant (Brown 2009: 149; also ch. 4).
- (3) Traditions stressing the duty of obedience to the ruler, some emphasizing obedience at any cost, even if one witnesses favouritism, corruption, and oppression, so long as the ruler establishes regular prayers or some such condition. These traditions are especially numerous in the Sunnī canon.
- (4) Traditions emphasizing the commanding of right and forbidding of wrong, speaking truth to power, warning against flattering or even consorting with rulers, thus qualifying, counterbalancing, or even contradicting the previous cluster. These traditions are shared by Sunnī and Shī‘ī bodies of hadith.

The cluster of hadiths that comes closer than any other to satisfying the Schmittian sense of political theology is that which includes the aforementioned declaration, ‘The ruler is God’s shadow on earth’ (*al-sultān ḡill Allāh fī al-arḍ*), and is worthy of attention for its curious history and usages. Nearly a dozen versions (that is, narrations, *riwāyāt*) of this tradition are listed in traditional compendia of hadith (Hindī 1981: 6:4–14). To the

aforementioned declaration, most narrations add various conditions or explanations, for instance: '[the ruler] has the reward of seventy saints', 'if he is just, he gets reward and the subjects must be grateful, if he is oppressive, he will be asked in the afterlife but the subjects must be patient', 'if one of you enters a town with no ruler, leave it immediately', 'do not curse or abuse him', 'when God creates someone for the caliphate, He touches his forehead with His hand' (al-Suyūṭī, *al-Jāmi' al-ṣaḡhīr*, 491ff; Hindī 1981: 6:4–14). hadith scholars declare all these versions, with the possible exception of one, unreliable and even fabricated. Nevertheless, the usefulness of this image of the ruler, regardless of his character or conduct, as being the shadow of God has been naturally tempting, and one can find such claims throughout history until today (Yılmaz 2018: 186; Zamzamī 1991).

While establishing a metaphorical link between the ruler and God, even this hadith does not quite offer a Schmittian political theology in which a secular ruler can assume divine prerogatives; in most versions, the accolade of 'God's shadow' is made contingent on the ruler's just conduct in accordance with God's law. Far more typical is the notion conveyed in a better known and more established hadith, in which being a just ruler is one of seven virtuous traits that win one a place under God's shadow, others including spending one's youth in worship, loving mosques, and giving charity in secret (Dumayjī 1987: 111, 344).

4 Inheriting the Prophet's sovereignty: the early caliphate

Political thought proper was born in Islam at the moment of the Prophet's death. Strictly speaking, there could be no political theory when the Prophet was alive and receiving infallible oracles from God. Since his politics was underpinned by revelation, there was no room for strictly political ideas. The Prophet Muḥammad's death in 11 AH/632 CE, however, brought to the fore the crucial question of who rules the community and who inherits his mission and authority. The watershed moment in the formation of Rāshidūn (lit. rightly guided; the Sunnī designation for the first four successors of the Prophet) political theology is the inaugural speech of the first caliph, Abū Bakr (r. 11–13/632–634):

O people, I have been appointed over you, though I am not the best among you. If I do well, then help me; and if I act wrongly, then correct me. [...] Obey me so long as I obey God and His Messenger. And if I disobey God and His Messenger, then I have no right to your obedience. Stand up now to pray, God have mercy on you. (Ṭabarī 1967: 210 [vol. 3])

This statement captures the first political idea in Islam, and the foundation of the caliphate as a political model: it draws a sharp line between the authority of Abū Bakr and that of the Prophet, while postulating the possibility of governance without supreme virtue or infallible knowledge.

4.1 Caliphate, rather than kingship

The idea of the cessation of prophethood and the rise of successors (caliphs) further represents a conscious break from the earlier Israelite tradition, which is otherwise invoked frequently in the Qur'an. Abū Bakr's statement suggests a recognition in early Islam of a categorical difference between Islamic and Israelite attitudes towards government or political power, for Islam's prophet is the last one and his deputies were neither divinely chosen nor guided in a direct sense (cf. Crone and Hinds 1986). The leading Sunnī canonical collections of al-Bukhārī and Muslim both report that this turning point in human history was prophesied by the Prophet Muḥammad himself:

'The Israelites used to be led by prophets (*kānat banū Isrā'īl tasūsum al-anbiyā'*); whenever a prophet died, another followed him. But after me, there is no prophet, but there will be deputies (*khulafā'*), and they will be many'. 'What do you command us to do', they asked. He said, 'Fulfill the pledge of one and then the next, and fulfill their right, for Allāh will ask them of what He trusted to them'. (al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *al-maghāzī*, *Bāb dhahāb jarīr ilā al-Yaman*, no. 4359)

Incidentally, the root s-w-s employed in this report to refer to the Israelite prophets' shepherding and leadership of their people also provides the Arabic word for politics, *siyāsa* (Anjum 2012: 59).

The caliphate was not prophethood, nor was it kingship. Since Islam blossomed, almost overnight, into the greatest empire ever witnessed within the Nile-to-Oxus region – the most ancient seat of civilization – it is often forgotten that the political problems of early Islam had been those of a different world, where the idea of any government or higher order was intolerable to the fiercely independent Arab nomads. Although not unfamiliar with kingship in the surrounding regions or within their own history, the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula harboured profound suspicions towards it (Shahin 2009). Islam, too, encouraged this attitude, with the early Muslims associating the idea with arbitrary power, decadence, and servitude. hadith reports record how this difference was noted and admired by notables from Yemen:

You O Arabs will do well so long as you consult when your chief dies, for when it is taken by the sword, they become kings (*mulūk*), their wrath is like the wrath of kings and their pleasure is the pleasure of kings. (al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *aḥādīth al-anbiyā'*, *Bāb mā dhukira 'an banī Isrā'īl*, no. 3455)

Securing obedience to even the Prophet himself had been so significant a problem that the Qur'an addresses it not just once, but on more than fifty occasions, with such warnings as the following:

But nay, by thy Lord, they will not believe (in truth) until they make thee judge of what is in dispute between them and find within themselves no dislike of that which thou decides, and submit with full submission. (Q. 4:65)

The Prophet's detractors balked at the imperative to obey a human spokesman of God (e.g. Q. 11:27; 17:94; 23:34). The hadith tradition, for example, speaks of a member of the Prophet's own community challenging his distribution of booty as unjust (al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, aḥādīth al-anbiyā'*, *Bāb wa-qawl allāh ta'ālā wa-ilā 'ād* no. 3344; *al-maghāzī, Bāb ba'thu 'alī wa khālīd ilā al-Uaman*, no. 4351). It is to be entirely expected, then, that the Prophet's deputies (in his own time, but especially after him) would face even greater challenges to their authority. The Peninsula-wide *ridda* (backsliding) movement in Abū Bakr's short reign must have been anticipated, and when it occurred, was met by the Medinan leadership with an iron fist and at a great cost.

4.2 The First Fitna

The first major sign of trouble in the caliphal paradise came when certain leaders in the garrison towns of Iraq and Egypt deployed Qur'anic language to mobilize against the third caliph, 'Uthmān (r. 23–35/644–656), eventually killing him. The reasons for their discontent likely stemmed from both the old world (tribal grievances against the hegemony of the Quraysh) and the new order (the slowing conquests and diminishing stipends for growing numbers of soldiers) (Hinds 1972). This regicide set off the First Fitna (also called First Civil War; *fitna*, a keyword in the Islamic political imagination, ranges in its meaning from personal temptation to social strife and civil war). The ensuing conflict, marked by three battles against rebels who were fellow Muslims, consumed the tragic five-and-a-half-year reign of the next caliph, 'Alī (35–40/565–561). The last of the battles was waged against zealots within his own army, a faction which came to be known, infamously, as the Khārijites (the seceders).

4.2.1 Khārijism

Khārijism emerged only two decades after the *ridda* movement, being thematically and genetically linked to the tribes involved therein and, we might surmise, to its anarchist impulse (Makin 2013). Whatever the political and socioeconomic roots of their grievances against the caliph in Medina, the Khārijites invoked the Qur'anic imperative of divine sovereignty (Q. 5:44) against 'Alī, who in their view had erred greatly by accepting both a

ceasefire with the rebellious governor of Syria, Mu‘āwīya, and human arbitration in matters settled by God. Their purported Qur’anic reasoning hinged on verse 49:9:

And if *two parties of believers* fall to fighting, then make peace between them. And if one party of them doeth wrong to the other, fight ye that which doeth wrong *till it return* unto the ordinance of Allāh; then, if it return, make peace between them justly, and act equitably. Lo! Allāh loveth the equitable. (Emphasis added)

Following days of extreme bloodshed, ‘Alī had agreed to arbitration after the Syrians sued for peace by raising scrolls of the Qur’an on their swords. Various reports give conflicting details, including whether ‘Alī declared the ceasefire willingly or upon the insistence of the same zealots who later turned on him. In any case, the would-be Khārijites subsequently accused ‘Alī of unbelief. In one modern scholar’s reconstruction, their case went something like this: ‘Has a command come down from heaven compelling ‘Alī to change his attitude? No. He must therefore persevere in the line of conduct followed at the start, continue the war, and refuse arbitration’ (Vaglieri 1965). To ‘Alī’s protest that arbitration did not violate God’s command, they rebutted with the Qur’anic verse against recalcitrant pagans: ‘Fight them, till there is no sedition (*fitna*) and the religion is God’s entirely’ (Q. 2:193).

The key difference between the two parties seems to have been that the Khārijites disregarded Q. 49:9’s affirmation (italicized above) that both parties within the dispute were believers. In consequence, they faulted ‘Alī for accepting arbitration because they insisted that the condition of truce (again italicized above) had not been fulfilled. While they were obviously inconsistent about the first issue – they could not consider the Syrians unbelievers if they invoked verse 49:9 – they further denied ‘Alī the right to judge whether the condition for ceasefire had been met and whether and when war should resume. To this, ‘Alī’s reported response was to try and persuade them that certain of God’s commands required human judgment. He further said:

The rule is for God, indeed, but on earth there are rulers. People cannot do without a chief (*amīr*) – be he [in his person] pious or impious – who gathers the scattered affairs and unites them, distributes the revenues, fights the enemy [*yujāhid al-‘aduww*] [...] so that the pious may be at peace and saved from the impious. (Riḍā 2004: 67; similar report in Ṣan‘ānī 1983: 150 [vol 10])

This answer suggests that the Khārijites were skeptical about the need for any human ruler, a tendency that became prominent among certain of their number during their second rise some three decades later (Crone 2000). Be that as it may, for reasons that

may have to do with their unacknowledged sociopolitical interests, the Khārijites framed the disagreement as a fatal compromise of divine sovereignty, and hence deserving of categorical judgment. As their political position hardened, it became sublimated to a theology, and the ordinary Muslims who did not support them were deemed deserving not only of excommunication, but indiscriminate slaughter (*isti'rāḍ*). This led to the decisive showdown between 'Alī and the rebels in the Battle of Nahrawān. The latter's defeat against the much larger army of the caliph would render Nahrawān a site of passionate memory for future Khārijism. The Khārijites, however, were not finished with 'Alī; one of them eventually assassinated the caliph, setting in motion the transfer of power to Mu'āwīya (r. 41–60/661–680). These fateful events influenced nearly all subsequent Islamic political theology.

During Mu'āwīya's twenty-year reign as the first Umayyad caliph, the Khārijites never seriously threatened the Muslim regime. They did, however, rebel continually in bands of a few hundred men at most, thus proving themselves to be a persistent menace to peace and security. Little can be attested of the theological dogma of these first rebels. The best preserved reference comes from a band led by the self-identified Commander of the Faithful, al-Mustawrid b. 'Ullafa, that arose just as Mu'āwīya assumed power in 41 AH/662 CE. A letter sent by al-Mustawrid b. 'Ullafa to Mu'āwīya provides a glimpse into Khārijite ideology in the wake of Nahrawān:

We seek vengeance on behalf of our people for tyranny in judgment, failure to enforce the Qur'anic punishments and monopolizing the revenues [which belong to the Muslims as a whole]. I summon you to the Book of God, Almighty and Glorious, and the example of His prophet and the government of Abū Bakr and 'Umar. I also call upon you to disavow [that is, declare as unbelievers and renounce loyalty toward] 'Uthmān and 'Alī for their innovations in religion and their abandonment of the judgment of the Book. If you accept, you will have come to your senses. If not, we will have run out of excuses for you; we will permit war against you and will reject you for your disgraceful acts. (Ṭabarī 1967: 191 [vol 5])

It is not clear whether the Khārijites proceeded from what they saw as a plain reading of the Qur'an towards the rejection of specific policies associated with 'Uthmān and 'Alī, or vice versa. Their tragic end, however, generated a distinctive political theology that questioned the need for human intermediaries in interpreting the Qur'an or making judgment in governance. Theirs was the first Qur'an-only movement in Islam, but it was not a doctrinal rejection of the Prophet's teachings (*sunna*). Rather, it was the by-product of their rejection of the holistic experience of the reception of a Qur'an that existed as living knowledge among the living companions. The community's reaction to the centrifugal impulses of Khārijism furnished the two keywords, *sunna* and *jamā'a*, with which the

mainstream Muslim majority identified itself in the following century, as *Ahl al-Sunna wa-al-Jamā'a* (The Party of Tradition and Unity).

5 Inheriting the Prophet: the Umma and the Imām

5.1 God's deputies: the contested political theology of the imperial caliphate

Contrary to their intentions, the Khārijites proved the pragmatic necessity of a government that could secure order and avert civil war, even at the expense of the early caliphs' virtues of justice and piety. Whereas 'Alī's loyalists in Iraq emphasized his credentials of piety and knowledge against Mu'āwīya and his clan, the Umayyads underscored their legitimacy on pragmatic grounds. Mu'āwīya's appointment of his son Yazīd as his successor, justified in the name of maintaining the fragile regional balance, proved to be a fateful mistake by an otherwise masterful politician. It elicited rebellion from Ḥusayn, the Prophet's grandson and 'Alī's son, and 'Abdallāh, son of the Prophet's first cousin al-Zubayr. The resulting Second Fitna (60–72 AH/680–692 CE) ended with the Marwānids, a different branch of the Umayyad clan, restoring Umayyad power. The tragic killing of Ḥusayn and his family at Karbala by 'Ubaydullāh, Yazīd's governor, would later become the centre of a new passionate cult built around the family of 'Alī and the Prophet.

Even with relative competence in domestic governance and expansion at the borders, the Umayyads faced a dire crisis of legitimacy as opposition to their rule gained momentum. The strongest challenge to their authority came from 'Alid loyalists in Iraq, who led numerous (but largely failed) rebellions through the length of Islamic history – although the splintering of the 'Alī loyalists (*shī'at 'Alī*) in Iraq into various theological sects took a lengthy and complex course over the next two centuries. The theological claims made by or on behalf of the 'Alids, as well as other theologically minded opponents, such as the *murji'a* and the *qadarīya*, likely contributed to the Umayyads expanding their own theological claims. Although scholars disagree as to whether the Umayyads were the active initiators of those claims or merely reacting to their opponents (Judd 1999), late Umayyad political theology revolved around the core claim that the ruler was the true repository of God's mission, 'God's caliph', so to speak. In this respect, the Umayyads shared a deeply Imām-centred vision of Islam with their 'Alid opponents. But while Umayyad claims and fortunes were put to an end by the 'Abbāsīd revolution (132/750), for the Shī'a, as we shall see presently, diametrically opposed circumstances obtained. To the Shī'ite claim that an imām with the right lineage ought to be ruler, the Umayyads retorted that God had already given his authority to those most fitting. It is likely that this latter tendency inclined them to the doctrine of predestinationism (*jabr*), which in its political deployment would have meant that opposing the ruler is tantamount to rejecting God's will. In contrast, their theological opponents, the *qadarīya* and the *murji'a*, stressed human responsibility. Certain 'Abbāsīds, too, tried in vain to claim a wide range of religious

powers, as evident in the political writings of their Persian secretary, Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. c. 139/757; Lambton 1981: 53). This conflict between the two visions came to a head in al-Ma'mūn's inquisition regarding the createdness of the Qur'an (Anjum 2012: 37).

5.2 Shī'ī political theology: sacred lineage, infallible rulers

How the major components of the Imāmī-Shī'ī doctrine of the imāmate evolved – whether it was a political dispute that became theology, as the mainstream account goes, or a theological belief in the cosmic significance of 'Alī or the Prophet's family – remains disputed (Gleave 2005). The lack of support for 'Alid doctrine in the Qur'an encouraged claims among the Shī'a about its incompleteness, with some claiming that as much as nine-tenths of the Qur'an is hidden (Anthony 2012). The 'Alid loyalists tended to be fissiparous, and by 122/740 they had split into Zaydīs and Imāmīs. Zaydī (also known as Fiver) political theology differed from that of the Imāmīs by placing a greater value on the acquired virtues of the imām. The office of imām was therefore earned rather than inherited; any viable candidate had to possess virtue, religious knowledge of jurisprudence and doctrine, and justice and courage demonstrated through standing up to injustice and impiety and launching a successful rebellion.

In contrast, for the Imāmīs, knowledge was passed esoterically via lineage, from and to the right son in each generation, and obedience and mystical devotion was demanded of all followers. The Imāmī credo therefore included the formula shared with other Muslims – 'There is no deity but God, and Muḥammad is His messenger' – while adding the declaration *'Alī walī Allāh* ('Alī is the ally/friend of God). The imām was thereby established as the axis of creation and the gateway to God, with recognition of him being a prerequisite for salvation. There can only be one active imām at any given time, although his successor may be at his side as a silent (*ṣāmit*) imām. The Imāmīs came to believe that 'Alī's appointment as the Prophet's successor was announced on various occasions, most significantly at Ghadīr Khumm, during the Prophet's return to Medina from his last pilgrimage. The sources offer differing descriptions of the nature and extent of the imām's knowledge. According to some accounts, the imām has perfect mastery of the Qur'an and hadith. Elsewhere, he is also said to be endowed with supernatural knowledge (such as knowledge of the future and of all languages) and an understanding of the esoteric meaning of the Prophet's teaching. There is general agreement that the imām is divinely protected against error (*ma'ṣūm*) and is thus an infallible guide to Islamic law and doctrine.

Among the Imāmīs, a major split occurred between the Seveners, characterized by both political and doctrinal radicalism, and the Twelvers, the political quietists who today form the main subgroup of the Imāmīs. For the latter, the Twelfth Imām, Muḥammad al-Mahdī – said to be a direct descendant of 'Alī through his son Ḥusayn – was born around 255/870 and went into concealment, or occultation (*ghayba*), in 873 or 874. Until his return near

the end of time, his incognito existence deprives the faithful of the only figure entitled to legitimate rule (Akhavi 2013: 208).

Historically in Muslim societies, genealogical claims have played a significant role in legitimating political power despite early Islam's egalitarianism and absence of ideas such as primogeniture. Rebels and dynasties frequently claimed descent from the Prophet's family or from his Companions. In Iran, political legitimation further drew on pre-Islamic Iranian mythology, while the Turco- Mongolian conquests gave rise to new lines of noble ancestry and new forms of political theology that competed with Islamic ones. Rebels often enlisted genealogies to bolster claims ratified less by fact than political success. The Fāṭimids claimed descent from the Prophet's daughter, Fāṭima, through the Seventh Imām, Ismā'īl, despite widespread rejection of that claim even among other Seveners. Later in Iran, the Safavids – who originated as leaders of a Sunnī Sufi order in Persian Kurdistan and were Kurds, not Arabs – came to claim descent from 'Alī and were responsible for the forced conversion of Iran to Twelver Shī'ism. The families of sayyids and sharifs have been accorded enormous prestige in most Muslim societies and have secured preferential treatment, access to patronage in the form of royal stipends and hereditary judgeships, and positions as shrine superintendents and endowment supervisors.

6 Classical Sunnī political theology: rulers as trustees

A ruler had to be appointed to look after the affairs and wealth of the Umma, in the way a principal (*wakīl*) looks after the affairs of his ward, and when the ruler fails in this duty in some fundamental way, he must be deposed, possibly through armed rebellion. This seems to have been the political theology of early Muslim authorities, including among proto-Sunnī or early Sunnī authorities such as Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767), Mālik (d. 179/795), and (in some reports) al-Shāfi'ī (d. 205/820), each of whom reportedly supported or participated in armed rebellions against the rulers.

With the failure of the last major Shī'ī rebellion of al-Nafs al-Zakīya in 145/762, a new anti-political consensus seems to have slowly set in, as suggested by two illustrious examples. The first is Abū Yūsuf (d. 182/798). Unlike his teacher Abū Ḥanīfa – who died in prison, likely for having supported the aforementioned rebellion – Abū Yūsuf accepted the office of chief judge (*qāḍī*) during the reign of the 'Abbāsīd caliph Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 180–193/786–809). Yet, as evident in his *Kitāb al-Kharāj*, he does not call the ruler 'God's caliph', nor concede to him the authority to decide scriptural meaning or points of law, but rather limits his role to matters of defense, administration, and policy. Not only that, but he exhorts the caliph to obey the teachings of the pious ancestors (*salaf*), in which he no doubt included his teacher.

A similar attitude is evident in the conduct of the last of the four canonical Sunnī authorities, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855). He is known to have suffered through the ‘Abbāsīd inquisition with heroic courage, yet refused to curse his tormentor, the caliph al-Ma’mūn, for imposing the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur’an (Cook 2000: 106–113). This refusal captures the grand compromise of the third/ninth century evident among the Sunnīs. Their quietism shunned armed rebellion against the caliph/imām and might be labelled thoroughly pragmatic, unlike the more radical messianic quietism of the Twelver Shī’a in the era of occultation. The Sunnī theory admitted the necessity of political obedience while simultaneously stripping the caliphate of any trappings of holiness or absolutism enjoyed by the emperors in Persia or Byzantium. This autonomy in the religious sphere, and the consolidation of religious authority in the hands of scholars of the Qur’an and the Sunna, came at the cost of the Umma’s claims to the political sphere (Anjum 2012: 90–92; Al-Sarhan 2020). Showdowns pitting fearless scholars against the all-powerful caliphs became the exception, not the rule (Zaman 1997), and when ‘Abbāsīd power waned over the course of the fourth/tenth century, Sunnī scholars became the champions of the caliphate as the lynchpin of Islamic order.

6.1 Key works

Among the earliest works to indicate the political theology of the Sunnī ‘*ulamā*’ is that attributed to Abū Ḥanīfa’s aforementioned student, Abū Yūsuf, the chief *qāḍī* of Hārūn al-Rashīd. In *Kitāb al-Kharāj*, he parts ways with his teacher’s oppositional attitude to power, acknowledging the reality of ‘Abbāsīd dominance while attempting to discipline it through the religious knowledge that the ‘*ulamā*’ preserved. Subsequently, Sunnī political theology became fully theorized after the effective decline of ‘Abbāsīd power under the Shī’ī Būyids, with the earliest of such treatises being Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī’s (d. 403/1013) *al-Tamhīd fī al-radd ‘alā al-mulḥida al-mu‘aṭṭila wa al-rāfiḍa wa al-khawārij wa al-mu‘tazila* (A Preliminary in the Refutation of the Heretical Deniers [of God’s attributes], the Rafīḍīs, the Khārijites, and the Mu‘tazilites; Ibish 1966). This theological tract was directed, as its very title suggests, against the most prominent competitors of Sunnism. Since these ‘heterodoxies’ were all political in origin, the response took the form of political theology. Around the time the Būyids were expected to lose to the incoming Sunnī Seljuk conquerors from the east, Shāfi’ī chief jurist Abū al-Ḥasan b. al-Ḥabīb al-Māwardī (d. 450/1058) wrote a decisive treatise on the subject of political theology, shifting the discourse from the realm of theological polemics to that of politics and law. His *al-Aḥkām al-sultānīya* (Ordinances of Government) has since become the authoritative expression of the classical Islamic theory of the caliphate.

Another major step in expanding the Islamic political imagination was taken by another leading Shāfi’ī jurist of Baghdad, Abū al-Ma‘ālī al-Juwaynī (d. 471/1085) in his *Ghiyāth al-umam fī Illiyāth al-zulam* (Aid to Nations in Times of Darkness). Al-Juwaynī grounds

the obligation of establishing a caliphate in the highest authority achievable by any norm, the consensus of the Companions, and proceeded to imagine life in the absence of the caliphate and then, even more boldly, in the absence of scholars qualified to exercise independent reasoning (*ijtihād*; Anjum 2016a). Al-Juwaynī stands out in this tradition for his attention to power – an attentivity soon overturned by his illustrious disciple, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), who was more inclined towards idealism and the symbolic integrity of the community than political theory. Al-Ghazālī's political thought, much like his theological and metaphysical thought, both reflected and immortalized the ironies of his age (Anjum 2012: 125). Fundamental contributions to Islamic political and historical consciousness were made in the late middle period, to which we will return presently.

6.2 The obligation of appointing an imām

The main commitments of classical Sunnī political theology, right up until the colonial period, can be distilled into a few tenets shared by all Sunnī legal and theological schools, with only minor variations:

- (1) Installing an imām is an obligation. Most also held that the basis of this obligation is revelation. In fact, with the exception of a few outliers among the Khārijites and some of the Baghdādī Mu'tazila (Dumayjī 1987: 45; Lambton 1981: 77–78), all theological schools in Islam agreed on the necessity of installing an imām. The chief difference between the Sunnī and the Shī'a lay in the former's insistence that the caliph/imām constitutes a legal obligation rather than a salvific necessity (that is, not having or knowing an imām falls into the category of sins that do not approach unbelief), and his function is to govern the community by divine law rather than to guarantee the fundamental integrity of religion and salvation.
- (2) There must be only one imām for the Umma at any given time. Some allowed multiple imāms only if such were separated by a sea or an enemy territory – an obvious concession to the Spanish Umayyads – although al-Juwaynī clarified that this was not a license for multiple imāms, as the separated imām was merely an amīr, not a caliph (Anjum 2016b).
- (3) Sunnīs insisted, in contradistinction to the Imāmī Shī'a, that the imām must be present and visible, rather than in occultation; that the imām need not be in possession of perfect or esoteric knowledge, only feasible mastery of the knowledge of the law, which could be complemented by other scholars; and that the imām must be an upright Muslim of adequate piety, but need not be most supreme in piety or status (Lambton 1981: 74; Hallaq 1984: 35). In all these cases, the Sunnīs were motivated by practical concerns, justifying historical or current rulers in order to continue the institution of the caliphate, whereas Shī'a doctrine was invested in the exact opposite.

- (4) Most Sunnīs insisted, in contrast to both the Shī‘a on the one hand and the Khārijites on the other, that the imām must be from the Prophet’s tribe of the Quraysh, although some did question even this requirement (Dumayjī 1987: 275).

One question on which Sunnī theologians differed concerned whether the caliphate must be a political institution, as normally conceived, a position insisted upon by most classical scholars, including al-Bāqillānī, Abū Ya‘lā al-Farrā’ (d. 458/1066), al-Juwaynī, and Ibn Taymiyya, among others, or whether its function was primarily symbolic and constitutional, such that even a powerless caliph could be tolerated as acceptable, as conceded by a minority, including al-Māwardī and al-Ghazālī (Anjum 2012).

6.3 Appointing the imām

Most authors agree that the imāmate is established by either: (i) election (*ikhtiyār*) by one or more electors, followed by a pledge (*bay‘a*), or (ii) testamentary designation by the previous imām (‘*ahd*). In the early phase of caliphate theory, there existed important disagreement about whether testamentary designation constituted an independent means of appointing an imām. The Mu‘tazila, for example, considered it invalid altogether (Dumayjī 1987: 188). The Mālikī scholar al-Bāqillānī, the Ḥanbalī scholar Abū Ya‘lā, and others considered it valid only if followed by the *bay‘a* of the electors, thus effectively reducing its value to mere nomination (Anjum 2012: 114). Abū Manṣūr ‘Abd al-Qāhir Ṭāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037) considered designation legitimate, but without explicitly specifying whether confirmation by electors was necessary. He does state, however, that if the designated person is fit for the imāmate, the community is obligated to accept him – as in the case of Abū Bakr’s designation of ‘Umar – which would mean that the electors’ confirmation is only a ritual if the designated imām is suited for office (Lambton 1981: 82). One may compare this dispute with the contemporary controversy surrounding whether the US vice president has any actual power to ratify the results of a valid election. Al-Māwardī is the first in this tradition to not only claim a consensus on the designation but also to consider designation a method of appointment independent of confirmation by the electors (Anjum 2012: 114). Starting with al-Juwaynī, brute force (*ghalba*) also appears as an independent way for an imām to attain power.

The early classical period was interrupted by the calamitous Mongol attacks of 1258. In the wake of the devastation of Islam’s eastern lands, Muslim political theology developed in new directions.

7 Eastern political theologies

The political theology of the ‘Abbāsīd period gradually absorbed and reflected the Persian imperialist tradition, in which justice was the gift of an incomparably powerful, absolute monarch. This represented a drastic departure from the earlier period, where justice

emerged from a negotiation between pious Qur’anic meritocracy and relatively egalitarian Arab tribal tradition (Marlow 2002). With the rise of Persian and Central Asian successor kingdoms, the political advice literature, or mirrors of princes, also rose in importance. The clash of Persian statecraft with the hierarchical organization of Central Asian nomadic tribes was less marked than with earlier Islamic egalitarianism; the latter had been tamed, but never eliminated, by Persian absolutism (Marlow 2010). Variants of this political theology and statecraft spread throughout the Islamic world, where it existed uneasily alongside the caliphate discourse of the Sunnī ‘*ulamā*’ (see below) in both its sources and norms. This coexistence was facilitated both by mutual compromise and the fact that the two genres addressed somewhat different concerns. In contrast to early classical Sunnī theory, the statecraft literature of this later period readily describes the king or sultan as ‘God’s deputy’ and ‘God’s shadow on earth’, and often suggests absolute power. In fact, the same author could express two directly opposing viewpoints depending on the genre, as in the case of al-Māwardī (Anjum 2012: 261).

After the Mongol conquest, the legacy of Chinggis Khan (d. 1221), both in lineage and political theology, came to dominate much of the Islamic east, including Persia and Muslim India. Rather than Qur’anic political theology or its approximation in the classical Sunnī model, it was royal lineage (‘Alid or Chinggisid) and ‘the use of cosmic rituals derived from [the] “Hermetical” sciences of astrology, lettrism, and alchemy [...] [that] uph[e]ld the sacredness of the ruler independent of Islamic scripture’. Indeed, ‘the most important title of kingship after the Mongols, who had destroyed the “scriptural” institution of the caliphate, became an astrological one, Lord of Conjunction (*Ṣāhib Qirān*)’ (Moin 2017: 94). In particular, in Mughal India under Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605), ‘[s]acred kingship overpowered monotheism’ (93) as the person of the ruler was sanctified through rituals collected from Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and other religions gathered under the rubric of a new religion, *dīn-i ilāhī*, and justified through the rampant millenarian expectations of the region. In this return to non-monotheistic political theology, Akbar touted *ṣulḥ-i kull* (total peace, or peace with all) between religions, which was meant to reduce Islam to the level of other conquered religions, while sanctifying the ruler as being above all. This did not mean a policy of pacifism or nonviolence, for Akbar relentlessly conquered and punished; it simply meant that it was politics, not theology, that drove war.

8 Islamic political theology in comparison

8.1 Jewish and Christian political theologies

The Hebrew scripture maintains a deep ambivalence towards kingship, ranging from reverence for figures like Saul, David, and Solomon, who owe their authority to divine selection and enjoy a special relationship and communication with God, to condemnation of kingship as akin to idolatry (for God is the one true king). The Qur’an and hadith articulate their vision of proper government in conscious conversation with the Hebrew

tradition, using the Israelite prophets and their followers as role-models, but also, on the crucial issue of kingship, parting ways in two respects: by embracing human political authority and by reconstituting kingship as a deputyship to the Prophet rather than as a rival to divine authority ([section 3](#)). David and Solomon are prophet-kings, to be emulated in their virtue, but their authority cannot be claimed by any non-prophet, nor is kingship permitted in *Sharīʿa* (Islamic Law). In one hadith, the Prophet Muḥammad himself chooses to be a slave of God (*ʿabd*) rather than a king (*malik*) like Solomon (Dumayjī 1987: 37–39).

Islamic scriptural texts (the Qurʾan and hadith) are largely silent about the later and more secular experience of Jewish monarchy. This silence extends to later Hebrew dynasties (140 BCE–92 CE), which combined ancestral biblical kingship with Hellenistic forms, and which the Qurʾan implicitly condemns for rejecting Jesus’s prophethood (Q. 3:55; 4:155). This silence extends also to the Christian imperial experience that followed. Philo of Alexandria, the first Jewish philosopher and adherent of the Abrahamic tradition to reconcile the personal Abrahamic God with the Greek philosophers’ First Cause, likened kings to God only in desired virtue, while infusing regal language with metaphorical descriptions of God as a mighty king (Bardill 2012: 341). Aristotle and Plato, it will be recalled, had recommended that government be handed to the ‘best man’ who, in his achievements, would be like a god (Bardill 2012: 359). Similar themes can be found in Christian thinkers like Eusebius, the apologist for the Emperor Constantine, who took them a step further, casting Constantine in the image of God, arguing that ‘a good king should attempt to replicate on earth the heavenly rule of the Supreme Deity’ (2012: 354). Although absent in Islamic scriptural texts, these themes become quite common in various Islamicate traditions.

8.2 Hellenistic political theology

The Islamic world’s Hellenistic philosophical tradition (termed *falsafa*) offered the most complete alternative to Qurʾanic political theology. This rationalist, top-down, descending, and absolutist tradition, despite its foreign origins, could be harmonized with the ruler-centred political theology of both the late Umayyad and ‘Abbāsīd theorists, as well as their Imāmī opponents. Just as, in this tradition, the intellect (*ʿaql*) was thought of as an eternal and divine essence external to – rather than constitutive of the cognitive or physiological foundation of – the human being, so too was the philosopher-king or lawgiver external to society and yet necessary to direct it. Only the philosophers could constrain and direct the base instincts of the masses who, if left unchecked, would perish just as a body does without a brain (Fakhry 2005: 128; Anjum 2012). This necessitarian system, in which philosophy and religion were inseparable, as were cosmology (being) and epistemology (knowing), was fundamentally at odds with the Abrahamic notion of a God who created freely and gave humans reason as an instrument for survival and recognition of divine signs (Oakley 2005).

9 Late classical developments

In the post-Mongol period, we observe some Muslim thinkers pushing classical Sunnī political theology in a more imām-centred or (to borrow terminology from a historian of medieval Christianity) descending direction, whereas others explore more ascending, or Umma-centred, directions while staying true to Sunnī political theology's basic premises (Ullmann 1965).

9.1 Descending interpretations: al-Ījī

The impact of Mongol rule, *falsafa*, and Shī'ism can be sensed in the thinking of the influential Ash'arite-Sunnī theologian, 'Aḍūḍ al-Dīn al-Ījī (d. 756/1355), whose writings on the caliphate clearly concede some of the premises of his Shī'ī interlocutors. The Shī'a challenge was: 'The imamate is God's and the Prophet's lieutenancy, and so the validity of the office cannot be established by the decision of others, i.e., the electors (*ahl al-bay'a*); if it were so, then the imām would be their caliph, not God's and the Prophet's'. Al-Ījī responds by granting the premise rather than arguing for the right of the Umma to elect one of its own as a representative, thus parting with his classical Sunnī forebearers. Instead, he argues that just as a legal analogy (*qiyās*) only explicates and does not create God's law, so the *bay'a* only brings out someone who is made imām by God (Kerr 1966: 34–35). The Sunnī imām was now chosen directly by God, just as the Shī'ī imām was. The electors merely constitute an instrument of God's ruling, not the Umma's will. The Umma is irrelevant, no longer an instrument (or at best approximation) of God's will; God's will is done regardless of who the electors choose as caliph/imām. Commenting on this dialogue, Malcolm Kerr observes: 'This is a decisive rejection of the contract theory; the *ahl al-bay'a* are considered mere functionaries, not interested parties' (1966: 34–35).

9.2 Ascending interpretations: Ibn Taymiyya

Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328) attempts to recover the ascending direction of early Sunnī theology already visible in the writings of the Ḥanafī Abū Yūsuf, the Mālikī al-Bāqillānī, and the Ḥanbalī Abū Ya'īla, one in which the imām is the agent (*wakīl*) of the Umma. In the words of E. I. J. Rosenthal, 'it is clear from this attitude [of Ibn Taymiyya] that the center of gravity has shifted from the *khilāfa* and the *khalīfa* to the community, whose life must be regulated by the divine law. At the same time, he pleads for close co-operation between the imam – the necessary authority – and the community' (1958: 52).

This subtle yet remarkable shift in political theology was born out of a necessity obvious to anyone with as keen a sense of history as Ibn Taymiyya possessed. Writing after the destruction of Baghdad in 656/1258, and along with it the prestige of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate, Ibn Taymiyya could not, unlike earlier Sunnī theorists, ground the authority of the Islamic order in the continuation of the caliphate, the institution that could boast

an unbroken chain of succession to the Prophet. For al-Ghazālī, an Islamic order would necessarily unravel without the caliph's office; for Ibn Taymiyya, writing after that feared unraveling had taken place, the principle of political legitimacy had to be reconstructed from the bottom up – from the twin facts of the Umma and the divine law, the *Sharīʿa*, and from the first principles of human nature and revelation. This becomes even more urgent since the military code (*yāsā*) of Chinggis Khan (d. 1227) had become a rival to the *Sharīʿa* (Anjum 2012: 26–30, 102–107).

Ibn Taymiyya's most significant contribution in this regard was his theorizing of Islamic political theology in terms of the first principles of revelation. In an interpretation that was unprecedented yet, once his view of political authority was granted, quite obvious, Ibn Taymiyya grounded all political authority in the Qur'anic arch-obligation to command right and forbid wrong – an obligation that, as noted earlier, the Qur'an declares to be the defining mission of the entire community. Humans are political animals, so any political authority necessarily commands and prohibits, and does so based on some standard of good. Since the Islamic community is constituted by its response to God's revelation, to follow divine command and prohibition in collective matters becomes a rational as well as revelational requirement.

9.3 The empirical turn: Ibn Khaldūn

A child of the Islamic west and its experience of the Reconquista by Christian powers, Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406), arguably one of the greatest historical thinkers of all time, turned his attention from theology to history. Rejecting both the moralizing polemics and key assumptions of the hyper-idealized Hellenistic heritage found in *falsafa*, he sought to explain the rise and fall of dynasties and states not by recourse to their theological or philosophical rectitude, but the observable phenomenon of group solidarity. The paradigmatically significant events facing Ibn Khaldūn were the civil wars of the first century of Islam. He sought to explain in a novel way how Islam had empowered the mutually warring Arab tribes to coalesce into a single body of believers. Political power, he argued, is generated by the strength of group solidarity (*ʿaṣabiyya*), offering a sociological rather than primarily theological explanation for Islam's triumph.

The intersection of theology with social science so evident in Ibn Khaldūn's work merely expanded on a theme already evident among Sunnī theorists from early on: devotional piety alone is not the only determinant of the attainment and longevity of political power. Competence, justice, and wise policymaking also all play a role. Sunnī scholars had long held, for instance, that for political offices competence should be prioritized over personal piety, thus presupposing that 'the world is not so enchanted that the piety of the ruler would in itself ensure prosperity and piety of the ruled' (Anjum 2016b: 11).

9.4 Eighteenth-century reformism

9.4.1 The last great synthesis: Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi

On the eve of Islam's colonial encounter with the West, a number of reformist and revivalist movements were afoot. One of the most intellectually profound was the last grand Sunnī synthesis of the premodern Islamic tradition, undertaken by the preeminent eighteenth-century Islamic authority of India, the jurist-Sufi-philosopher Shāh Walī Allāh (d. 1174/1762). His synthetic breadth is evidenced by the way in which he defends Sunnism against the encroachment of Shī'ī ideas by employing, in a novel fashion, an analogy to the Eucharist. Just as Christ had entered the bodies of his disciples in the form of the bread he had shared with them, Walī Allāh argued that the Prophet acted through the limbs of his rightly guided successors, particularly Abū Bakr and 'Umar, whose victories were therefore really the Prophet's own (Zaman 2020: 318). His epistemology is just as eclectic, combining scriptural and legal reasoning with a rare sociological insight and mystical inspiration that gave him access to the 'High Angelic Council' (based on a cryptic Qur'anic reference, *al-mala' al-a'lā*, Q. 38:69). He argued, as leading jurists before him had, that God has given the sacred law (*Sharī'a*) to promote discernible human interests, but his epistemological toolkit allowed him to speculate much further afield than earlier jurists.

Political theology is near the heart of Walī Allāh's concerns, as he offers, like Ibn Khaldūn, 'quasi-sociological explanations of the working of human societies, their rise and decline' (Zaman 2020: 316). In his telling, the prophets and their successors, the axis of human history, guide human communities by giving or reforming law and custom. Like authors in the Hellenistic philosophical and Indo-Persian advice traditions, and unlike the early classical tradition's conception of the ruler as communal agent (*imām-as-wakīl*), Walī Allāh's social world is starkly divided between commoners, to whom the true rationale for legal rulings is and perhaps ought to be inaccessible, and the spiritual and intellectual elite, to whom it may become evident. Like the philosophers, he justifies the actions of the Prophet or a deputy (caliph) through a rational schematization in which the commoners need to be skilfully managed. Unlike the early Sunnī tradition, in which the ruler's conduct is subject to the watchful eyes of the scholar, for Walī Allāh a ruler's status places him above normal rules, so much so that he is justified in insisting that a policy he knows to be erroneous is in fact correct.

Writing in the wake of Emperor Akbar's sacralization of power and invention of a new syncretic religion, Walī Allāh embraced a thoroughly descending vision of political theology. Going beyond the late classical jurists' pragmatic acceptance of the rule of a usurper, he posited a justification of power reminiscent of certain maximalist strands in Marwānid propaganda (see above), which saw power as a token of God's favour (Zaman 2020: 323). Power had always been seen as necessary to properly uphold the Islamic order, but for Walī Allāh it became its own justification (2020: 323, 325). In an analogy that

would have horrified early classical Sunnī authors, he invokes astrology to link latter-day Muslim adventurers to the Prophet Muḥammad:

[T]he horoscope of Sultan Maḥmūd of Ghazni (r. 998–1030), who had raided India multiple times from his base in what is today east-central Afghanistan, was identical with that of the Prophet in terms of planetary conjunctions, which is what had enabled Mahmud to have his successful career as a conqueror. (Zaman 2020: 326)

The sacrality of power in Walī Allāh's thought makes his political theology unusual in Sunnī tradition insofar as power becomes the chief quality which earns a ruler the authority 'to decide on the state of exception' and end disputes, religious or otherwise. Decisively strengthening, if not altogether elevating, the side of politics in the Sunnī tradition's extended balancing act between power and truth, Walī Allāh comes closer to Carl Schmitt than any other major Muslim political theorist (Zaman 2020: 328).

9.4.2 Purist revivalism

At the opposite extreme of Walī Allāh's grand synthesis stood, in varying degrees, the political theology of purist revivalism. None were more successful within this tradition than Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206/1792). Inclined towards an activist, anti-intellectualist strand of the Ḥanbalite tradition, and located outside the shadow of imperial power in the barely-governed region of central Arabia, he sought to emulate the Prophet Muḥammad's struggle – that of a handful of committed monotheists pitted against a polytheistic world. Armed with a simple doctrine of uncompromising monotheism, he saw contemporary Muslims as having fallen prey to polytheism and the high '*ulamā*' tradition to Greek logic. Although power itself, such as that of the Ottoman sultan in Istanbul, had no moral worth, when a tribal chief joined his mission, a primitive division of labour was worked out in which the ruler's authority was unquestioned so long as he supported the mission. The ruler was not like God in any way, nor was any specific set of virtues required of him. Yet the extremely lax condition that he be obeyed so long as he remains Muslim, no matter how otherwise wicked, could become dangerously absolute.

Wahhabism shared with sister revivalist movements its critique of folk religion but stood out for its uncompromising attitude and immense military success. In fact, it was not the first time in Islamic history that a religious movement outside the ambit of a great power centre had faulted its opponents for falling short of correct monotheism and fought them as infidels. Notwithstanding Sunnī Islam's embrace of a big-tent approach, coupled with an imperative to avoid excommunicating Muslims if at all possible, such movements appeared in every sect and era, and have ranged in form from discursive-theological to messianic (Adang et al. 2016; Friedmann 2022). In the discursive category we may count the Almohad movement of the twelfth-century North African reformer, Ibn Tūmart (d. c.

1128 CE), which differed from Wahhabism only in that, instead of Hanbalism, it embraced a philosophized Ash'arite vision of monotheism. Another was almost contemporary with Wahhabism, the movement of Usman Dan Fodio (d. 1817) in West Africa, which similarly sought to reform Islam and excommunicate the wayward while waging war against them. Insofar as such movements saw hegemony completely consume the secular, with God's power being felt to directly guide politics, we might conceptualize these movements as a complete inversion of Schmittian political theology.

10 Colonialism and after: Muslim political theologies in a fragmented world

Modernity, which arrived in the Muslim world in a colonial carriage, posed grave and seemingly interminable challenges. A barrage of questions haunted the Muslim psyche, as evidenced in the poignant literary expressions of the Indian Muslim philosopher-poet Muḥammad Iqbal, specifically his *Shikwa* (The Complaint) and *Jawab-e Shikwa* (The Response). What had gone wrong? Had God granted domination to the West because it had discovered superior morality? Had the West truly discovered Reason, as it claimed – the virtue that God had always desired and encouraged in revelation, but which Muslim tradition, after its initial days of glory, had lost? Or had God unleashed the materialistic, godless West as a scourge to wake the Muslims from their slumber, and to test their conviction in the truth that had been passed down untainted? Who was to blame: the stagnant ‘*ulamā*’, or the faithless Muslim ruling elite eager to worship the sun rising from the West? Were the ‘*ulamā*’ and saints the cause of defeat, or the last men standing? Finally, when did this decline begin? Had Muslims only recently lost their way, or had they misconstrued God's message early on?

Notwithstanding the creativity of both the synthetic and purist strands of early modern revivalism, they have not strayed far from the realm of past interpretations. Starting in the nineteenth century, however, the very terms of debate began to change, and new political theologies emerged. In the following two centuries, as the religious, social, and political institutions of Muslim societies were directly and indirectly erased (Laurence 2021; Hallaq 2012; 2018), the Muslim world was forced to confront the problem of political theology with unprecedented urgency. Muslim intelligentsia coped with secularism through a combination of strategies that included self-critique, assimilation, and emulation, on the one hand, and resistance, critique, and reconstruction, on the other. A dazzling variety of ideas were put forth not only by the traditional intelligentsia, but also (and especially) by lay reformers and missionaries.

Western ideas may have been less important in this process than is often imagined, however. Equally disruptive were the epochal changes in the material conditions of Muslim societies: on the one hand, the demise of the great empires, including the symbol of the

caliphate, and erasure of traditional institutions, and on the other, with the steady rise of a global Muslim population, increased literacy, and unprecedented interconnectedness. The latter factors have created a Muslim middle class that, confronted with successive technological and political revolutions, has transformed the nature of Islamic discourse by infusing it with a staggering diversity of perspectives.

The great variety of modern experimentations in political theology can be classified into three broad categories: the embrace of secularity, the rejection of secularity, and the 'reformation' of secularity. However, given the deep contestations over the very nature of secularism, or perhaps because of the ubiquity of secular concepts and institutions, it is more convenient to differentiate between the champions of secularization and those of Islamization.

10.1 Secularizers

A range of intellectuals have advocated secularization since the dawn of European modernity. Late Ottoman intellectuals like Sayyid Bey, for example, each of whom argued within an Islamic reformist framework, were among the earliest to propose abolishing the institution of the caliphate (Guida 2008). They contended that the true caliphate had been enacted in early Islam through consultative election, in a manner best represented during their own time by constitutionalism and democracy. Islamic governance, in their view, had lost its true spirit after the thirty-year rule of the Rightly Guided Caliphs following the Prophet's passing. Their argument made three common moves. First, they sublimated the Rightly Guided Caliphate to an inimitable status. Second, they denigrated the subsequent caliphs and rulers as uniformly flawed. Finally, inspired by what they saw as ultimately superior Western ideas, such as constitutionalism and nationalism, they adopted a progressivist reading of modern history. These ideas were taken further by the Azhar-trained Egyptian scholar and politician, 'Alī 'Abd al-Rāziq (d. 1966). He theorized a fully secularized Islam built on two further conceptual moves: a thoroughly secular interpretation of early Islamic history, and an assimilation of the Protestant view of religion universalized by the Enlightenment as comprising belief and pious feeling separable from embodiment, community, and sociality. This allowed him to argue that the Prophet's message had been religious, not political (Rāziq 2012). Even the Rightly Guided Caliphs, starting with the Companions' *jihād* against *ridda* tribes under Abū Bakr, had made political and not religious decisions.

A further step in this direction was taken by the Sudanese communist intellectual, Mahmoud Mohammed Taha (d. 1985), who was executed for apostasy by the Sudanese dictator Jaafar Nimeiri. Taha recognized that 'Abd al-Rāziq's proposal was implausible so long as it failed to address the challenge posed by the Prophet's mission and the corresponding Qur'anic revelation in Medina, which contained unequivocal political

and legal injunctions (Taha 1987: 117). Rejecting the Medinan Qur'an as devoid of binding norms, Taha embraced the idea of progress in its most thorough sense: just as human history is a story of evolution from lower to higher forms, 'Islam, too, can never be concluded; progress in it is eternal' (2007: 179). The spirit and the terminus of this progress was Marxist: 'When such absolute equality is achieved through the grace of God, and as a result of abundant production, we shall achieve communism or a sharing of the earth's wealth by all people' (Taha 1987: 156; see also Duran 1992: 15).

10.2 Colonial-era Islamizers

The label 'Islamizers' helps us avoid charged and controversial labels such as 'political Islam' and 'Islamists'. It also serves as a capacious category inclusive of a wide range of actors who, with possibly conflicting ideas, have sought to preserve Islam in a plausible fashion. Confronted with the epochal rupture in political life introduced by colonialism and, even more so, Western science and technology, Muslims were often pressured to abandon their inherited ways and to isolate what was essential in their religion from what was not (and therefore available for sacrifice).

Among the Ottoman '*ulamā*' , the Islamic resistance to wholesale Westernization was exemplified by Muṣṭafā Ṣabrī (d. 1954), the last Ottoman *Shaykh al-Islām*. Having once served as a librarian for the last defiant Ottoman sultan, Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909), he had a tumultuous political and intellectual career, forced multiple times to relocate before finally settling in Egypt. Through his writings and lifelong activism, he argued that the material progress promised by Westernization, synonymous with secularization, was worthless if it contravened Islamic principles, and therefore must be resisted (Şeyhun 2014: 44–45). But what if the decadence of Islam's late medieval tradition contributed to the inability of Muslims to keep up with the modern West? Such was the view of reformers like Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) in Egypt and Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) in India, who both attempted a critique of the received tradition coupled with a thoroughgoing overhaul of Muslim education. For them, the dominion of the West was not just a test from God, but a wakeup call.

The secularizers, as noted earlier, had repurposed the traditional idealizations of the early caliphs and sectarian denigration of subsequent rulers. Against this, South Asian Islamizers could draw on the intellectual project of Shāh Walī Allāh, which had placed political authority at the heart of Islam and inspired action-oriented revivalist movements, including that of his grandson, Shāh Muḥammad Ismā'īl (d. 1831). Ismā'īl had rebuked pessimistic histories of perpetual decline, arguing that the Rightly Guided Caliphate is an achievable ideal for future Muslim rule. The prophetic ideal refracted through the early caliphs, consisting of piety, charisma, eloquence, missionary zeal, and leadership, was not meant to be beyond the reach of later revivalists and leaders (Tareen 2020: 107–109).

Less than a century later, in the face of British colonial domination, the erudite anti-colonial Muslim intellectual, journalist, and later nationalist politician and first Indian minister of education, Abul Kalam Azad (d. 1958), led the Khilafat Movement in support of the Ottoman Caliphate. Azad recast the caliphate as the root of the *Sharīʿa*, likening obligatory practices such as praying and fasting to its branches. Arguing in a manner reminiscent of Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, he made the normative foundations of the religion contingent on the existence of the caliphate. Whereas not praying or fasting was sinful, he argued, not aiding a Muslim caliph rendered one an outright non-Muslim: ‘Protecting the caliphate is more important than a thousand prayers or a thousand days of fasting. Why? Because disobedience towards the caliph is such a grave sin that a person who disobeyed the caliph, no matter how much he prayed or fasted, his prayers and fasts will not help his salvational prospects’ (Abul Kalam Azad, quoted in Tareen 2023: 124–125).

Azad’s anti-colonial politics were denounced by the Indian scholar and eponym of the Barelwi movement, Ahmad Raza Khan (d. 1921). Seeing Azad as a Hindu- and secularist-cavorting charlatan who undervalued the ritual and communal purity of Muslim life, Khan advanced an alternative, quietist political theology in which the Muslim community would protect its way of life by accepting those in power, i.e. the British. In this political theology, it was the received communalist tradition, with its rituals and hierarchies, that must be preserved. Since the sect, and not any broader affiliation, is the basic building block of the salvific community, the social must be elevated over the political. So long as that is assured, political loyalty may be effectively, but perhaps never fully, transferred from the Muslim caliph or sultan to the non-Muslim colonial overlords.

10.3 Postcolonial Islamizers

Although initial resistance to Western colonialism took an Islamic form, by the time of the Second World War, anticolonial movements had embraced nationalist rhetoric. Accordingly, the elites in most postcolonial nation-states in the Middle East adopted secular nationalist models that signalled secular political theologies. The abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate created a vacuum in political theology that was filled by Islamic social movements aimed at recovering Muslim cultural and intellectual independence. Often mistaken as mere reactions to modernity, these movements drew on layers of precolonial and colonial-era Islamic revivalism. One can observe such continuities in the preaching and missionary activity of the charismatic Egyptian schoolteacher, Ḥasan al-Bannā (d. 1949), the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose revivalist project was built on the contentions of conservative Ottoman-era thinkers, as well as reformists like Muḥammad ʿAbduh and Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935), combined with the populist form of Sufi orders (Mohamed 2023). Similarly, the ideas found in Shāh Walī Allāh and Abul Kalam Azad were developed by Deobandi Islam, as well as within the Jamaat-e-Islami of Sayyid Abul Aʿla Mawdudi (d. 1979). That Mawdudi has been among the most intellectually influential

architects of Islamic revivalist thought owes itself not only to his personal acumen and religious synthesis, which resonated with the expanding Muslim middle class, but also to the vibrant heritage of South Asian Islam on which he drew (Tareen 2020; Tareen 2023; Zaman 2020).

Mawdudi shares with Walī Allāh a willingness to critically engage with early Islamic history so as to incorporate it into his horizon of Islamic revival (Ahmad 2017). Instead of Walī Allāh's Islamized Neoplatonism and mystical cosmology, however, Mawdudi's framework is empirically grounded in colonial reality, propelled by the task of locating and critiquing Muslim decline. Unlike Walī Allāh's concern with engaging Shī'ite polemics, Mawdudi therefore sought to explain and reverse decline. He extracts from the early experience of Islamic history the following nine principles: divine sovereignty, justice for all, equality of Muslims, accountable government, consultation (*shūrā*), obedience to authority in goodness, prohibition of seeking power, the divinely given purpose of the state, and the right and duty of commanding good and forbidding wrong (Mawdudi 2000). His theory of history is thus a more studied iteration of a familiar declinist tradition which sublimates the Rightly Guided Caliphate and censures all Muslim rule from the Umayyads onwards. Furthermore, Mawdudi judged all subsequent revivals as having failed to restore the true consultative, pious, and just spirit of the early caliphate. The deficiency in past revivals was political, for none quite succeeded in restoring Islam's early political virtue. But this political theology is not resigned or tragic; rather, it is driven by the freedom to think past the restoration of the precolonial status quo – a freedom often lacking in the thought of Ottoman Islamizers. This optimism enabled Mawdudi to think, as modern progressive reformers were willing to do, beyond inherited forms, but without embracing the ostensible inevitability of secularization.

More consequential than even this daring but hasty historical assessment was Mawdudi's political theology, built around the idea of the human vicegerency (caliphate) of God based on an (at best) vague allusion in Qur'anic verse 2:30. At the heart of this political theology was not a resignation to leave matters to God, but an insistence on human responsibility towards and stewardship of God's creation by God-given laws (March 2019). This is a subtle shift in emphasis rather than a rejection of tradition, but it allowed Mawdudi to foreground human agency and moral responsibility, and thus explain the West's rise as a result of a God-given mandate to humanity rather than a breach of God's omnipotence. The proper worship of God required, Mawdudi contended, embracing God's sovereignty (*ḥākīmīya*), and thus rejecting any secular political arrangement, be it non-Muslim or Muslims ruling in the name of a secular ideology.

The Arab lineage of Islamizers received powerful expression in Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966), who synthesized post-Ottoman anti-colonial and reformist trends with the South Asian reformism he received through Mawdudi. The result was a highly original conceptualization

of Islamic Law as inherently liberatory. Quṭb contended that the essential flaw of secular modernity was humanity's servitude to manmade ideologies and institutions; true liberation could only come from total submission to God's perfect law, which sat in such complete harmony with human nature (March 2019).

10.4 The new Shī'ī political theology: *vilayat-e faqih*

Historically, since the beginning of occultation in the third/ninth century, Twelver political strategy has been centred around waiting for the hidden imām's return while making peace with the illegitimacy of all rulers. Twelvers thus embraced a starker, more doctrinal version of the compromise that many Sunnī '*ulamā*' had come to accept only in pragmatic terms. This thousand-year-old attitude changed with the fateful Iranian Revolution of 1979. Drawing on a nineteenth-century precedent, the leading Shī'ī cleric, Ayatollah Khomeini (d. 1989), developed the doctrine of *vilayat-e faqih* (in Arabic: *wilāyat al-faqīh*, guardianship of the jurist). Twelver jurists, having experienced political empowerment under Safavid rule during the tenth/sixteenth century, had begun to theorize that some of the functions of the hidden imām must partially devolve upon them. Indeed, by the nineteenth century, the jurists had taken up certain narrow functions of the imām. In a radical move, Khomeini expanded those functions to include political rule, the hallmark of the infallible hidden imāms, and further argued that a single jurist (namely, himself) could wield that responsibility. This became the Islamic Republic of Iran's official doctrine. Khomeini declared that 'not only did the top jurist have the right to exercise political rule, but he also had the power to suspend some of the secondary ordinances of the faith if he believed that such suspension was essential to rescue "Islam" from destruction' (Akhavi 2013: 209). The powers of the guardian-jurist, who was also the supreme authority in the Iranian state, therefore included the power to suspend the major pillars of faith, such as the daily prayers and the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Khomeini deployed the logic that many Sunnī autocrats have aspired to but seldom succeeded in exploiting: since the state was the true protector of Islam, anything that harms it would harm Islam itself, and therefore protecting the state became the highest obligation of faith.

10.5 Islamic political theology in the era of globalization

The Islamic awakening (*ṣaḥwa*) that followed both the decline of Arab nationalism in the 1970s and anti-Soviet jihādism (sponsored by the US) of the 1980s led to an era of reconciliation between Islamizers and Muslim state elites. This honeymoon ended with the Gulf War in 1990–1991, after which state elites sought to manage the Islamic energies of their populaces. This era was marked by profound shifts in the Islamic political imaginary, as Muslim reformers sought creative, if not always persuasive, ways to import modern concepts, such as territoriality, freedom, democracy, and constitutionalism. From Morocco to Malaysia, reformists and conservatives across an increasingly interconnected world

debated whether and how to move from classical Islam's singular 'Abode of Islam' to the territorial sovereignties of modern states (Baker 2003; Anjum 2016a; 2016b; Aljunied 2018; Rock-Singer 2019).

11 New directions

In response to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the US launched two punitive campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, while also sponsoring docile versions of Islam (e.g. Benard 2004). The so-called War on Terror triggered tectonic shifts in Islamic discourse and provided cover for states across the globe to discipline and penalize their Muslim populations with impunity. Against this backdrop, the promise (and then failure) of the Arab Spring in 2011 and apparent triumph of counterrevolutionary authoritarian regimes across the Middle East further intensified Muslim desires for an alternative world order. Meanwhile, globalization increased the Muslim presence in the Western academy and public sphere, facilitating a productive cross-fertilization of scholarship and enabling sustained questioning of the triumphalist self-narrations of secularism and liberalism (e.g. Asad 2003). Of note in this vein is Wael Hallaq's provocative and seminal critique of modern political theology, which challenges the compatibility of Islam with the modern world order. Hallaq argues that, in contrast to Western modernity, historical Islamic societies were fundamentally moral and conducive to human flourishing (Hallaq 2012). Hallaq's key target is the modern state, which he views through the lens of the Schmittian notion of political theology. The modern state is an anthropocentric entity that claims for itself, in its profession of popular sovereignty as well as its very structure, the sovereignty that in Islamic thought and history has belonged to God alone. Further, it 'promotes a *homo economicus* whose exclusive and ultimate desideratum is material profit' (Hallaq 2012: 161).

As we look to the future, the Muslim world, divided into approximately fifty nation-states, appears deeply unstable. Simultaneously, the chasm between the Muslim masses and their often foreign-backed elites grows wider. As the failure of the nation-state in the Muslim world becomes ever more evident, neoliberal economics and the global environmental collapse claim more victims and the world system arguably inches towards deglobalization and nativism. Within this context, the idea of a return to a (re)unified Muslim world, a modern caliphate of sorts, becomes stronger among Muslims globally. Although it is only beginning to attract scholarly attention, with every suppressed uprising in the Muslim world, every new cycle of terrorism and punitive war, every new violation of a Muslim population, and every new wall erected in the Global North, the idea of a pan-Islamic union wins more converts. Whatever path the Muslim world takes, it will likely resonate profoundly with the mobilizing and imaginative power of Islam, with Islamic political theologies of the past remaining vital to Muslim visions of the future.

Attributions

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